Stepping stones to the Neolithic?
Islands, maritime connectivity and the ‘western seaways’ of Britain, 5000-3500 BC

Duncan Garrow (Liverpool) & Fraser Sturt (Southampton)
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3 year project on the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition
(funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council)

Duncan Garrow (Liverpool) & Fraser Sturt (Southampton)
The Neolithic
The transition: 'colonisation' v 'indigenous adoption'
The delay...
The western seaways... key to understanding the transition

Fox 1932

Callaghan & Scarre 2009

Sheridan 2010
The spread of the Neolithic across Britain and Ireland

Whittle, Healy & Bayliss 2011
Western seaways: implicated but not really explored...

Icons of 5th M. contact: the Ferriter’s Cove cow bones and the Acnacreebeag pot

4495-4195 cal BC (95%)

4300-3700 BC (?)
The western seaways themselves: islands
The western seaways themselves: the sea
Objectives

• Achieve a greater understanding of the processes behind and chronology of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition within the western seaways zone
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• Construct a database of all known Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic settlement sites within the western seaways zone + submit bid for radiocarbon dates

• Excavate three key sites (Guernsey, South Uist, Isles of Scilly) to enhance record

• Model the changing nature of Holocene coastline morphology and connecting seaways
Other stuff

• Conference in 2013 (Liverpool) on ‘cross channel connections in prehistory’

• **Open days, public lectures, museum displays in each island group**

• Project website: [www.neolithicsteppingstones.org](http://www.neolithicsteppingstones.org)

• Twitter: @Neolithic_steps

• **Past sea levels simulation (Google Earth)**

• Western seaways navigation game (Google Earth)
Grey waters bright with Neolithic argonauts? Maritime connections and the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition within the ‘western seaways’ of Britain, c. 5000–3500 BC

Duncan Garrow¹ & Fraser Sturt²

Careful examination of the probable natural conditions for travel in the North Sea and Irish Sea during the late Mesolithic are here combined with the latest radiocarbon dates to present a new picture of the transition to the Neolithic in the British Isles. The islands of the west were already connected by Mesolithic traffic and did not all go Neolithic at the same time. The introduction of the Neolithic package neither depended on seaborne incomers nor on proximity to the continent. More interesting forces were probably operating on an already busy seaway.

Keywords: Britain, Ireland, Irish Sea, North Sea, Mesolithic, Neolithic
5th M. islands...

Orkney & Outer Hebrides

- Record v. patchy and only recently appreciated
- Sustained clearances (pollen)
- Sustained occupation?

Inner Hebrides

- Regular island hopping
- “Important highway” (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002)
- Possibly similar on closer inspection
Isle of Man

- Connected to Ireland (through stone tools)
- Separate from Britain?
- Or signalling difference because of contact? (McCartan 2004)
- Early (possible) cereal pollen
5th M. islands...

Isle of Man

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Dublin coast, Bardsey, etc. (Cooney 2004, Edmonds et al. 2010)
- Closer to shore, but v. difficult waters
- Regular visits
- Middens, scatters, occupation, burials
Isles of Scilly

- Record very patchy
- But definite Mesolithic presence
- Possibly seasonal visits for hunting, fishing, etc.?
Channel Islands

- Neolithic arrives c. 4800 (?)
- Strong connections with each other, and with mainland France
- Tomb types, pottery styles, stone axes, polished stone rings, etc.
- Similar picture in 4th M.
Early 4th M. islands...

Isles of Scilly

- Ephemeral occupation (pits, etc.)
- Possibly seasonal visits for hunting, fishing, etc.?
- Hembury Ware – 3750-3500 BC

Isle of Man

- Patchy picture – post-holes, pits
- Shouldered bowl / Mull Hill pottery – 3700-3300 BC
Outer Hebrides

- Some fairly stone substantial buildings
- Unstan and ‘Hebridean’ Ware pottery
- 3720-3370 cal BC

Orkney

- Several substantial buildings now
- Stone and timber built
- Unstan Ware pottery
- c. 3700-3400 cal BC
5th millennium archaeology

- Regular short-distance sea travel
- Definite long-distance voyages too
  - Channel Islands/France
  - Cornwall(?)/Isles of Scilly
  - Isle of Man /Scotland/Ireland
  - France/Ferriter’s Cove
  - France /Achnacreebeag (?)
- ‘Mesolithic’ and ‘Neolithic’ people involved
Early 4th millennium archaeology
• earliest Neolithic dates – 3750-3300 BC
• material culture local not long-distance
• if we are seeing 5th M. continental mariners, they are not obviously colonising the islands
• Neolithic seems to have local and late origins

... at least as far as we can tell now
Stepping Stones project excavations...
L’Eree, Guernsey (2008-11)
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L’Eree, Guernsey (2008-11)

- Material culture c. 4800-4000 BC (+ EBA)
- Features possibly throughout that period
- C14 date for hearth of 4330-4060 cal BC
- Sporadic, ephemeral, repeated occupation
The arrival of the Neolithic in the Channel Islands

Les Fouaillages, Guernsey (c.4800 BC)

Royal Hotel, Guernsey (c.4900-4700 BC)
Stepping Stones project aims

Earliest Neolithic in CIs?

Transition in Britain?

6000 BC  
5000 BC  
4000 BC  
3000 BC  

L’Eree
(VSG/Cérny)

Les Fouaillages
(VSG/Le Pinacle’)

Royal Hotel
(VSG/Cérny)

Le Pinacle, Jersey
(Cérny+)

Mont Orgueil, Jersey
(Cérny)

Herm
(??)
Stepping Stones project excavations...
An Doirlinn, South Uist
An Doirlinn, South Uist
An Doirlinn, South Uist (2005)

- Investigated by Sharples et al. in 2005
- Lots of flint and pottery (potentially Early Neolithic)
- Probable stone walls
An Doirlinn, South Uist (2012)
An Doirlinn, South Uist (2012)
An Doirlinn, South Uist (2012)
Eilean Domhnuill, Loch Olabhat, North Uist (Armit 1980s/90s)
Eilean An Tighe, North Uist (Scott 1950)
Stepping Stones project excavations...
Old Quay, St Martin’s
• Mesolithic and Neolithic material eroding onto the beach
• Series of test pits
• Larger open area excavation
The Sea and seafaring
The Sea and seafaring

Changing land/sea boundaries

Seafaring

Texture

And Peltier’s ICE5G GIA Models
8,000 BC

Sea-Level Change

Legend

Coordinate System: GCS WGS 1984
Datum: WGS 1984
Units: Degree

Models created in collaboration with Dr. Sarah Bradley.
Sea-Level Change

6,000 BC

Legend

Coordinate System: GCS WGS 1984
Datum: WGS 1984
Units: Degree

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Sea-Level Change

2,000 BC

Legend

Coordinate System: GCS WGS 1984
Datum: WGS 1984
Units: Degree

Models created in collaboration with Dr Sarah Bradley.
Sea-Level Change

6,000 BC

Legend
Metres above or below mean sea level
-4.501 - -50
-40 - -30
-29 - -20
-19 - -15
-14 - -10
-9 - -5
-4 - 0
1 - 5
6 - 10
11 - 15

Coordinate System: British National Grid
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: OSGB 1936
False Easting: 400,000.0000
False Northing: -100,000.0000
Central Meridian: -2.0000
Scale Factor: 0.9996
Latitude Of Origin: 49.0000
Units: Meter

Models created in collaboration with Dr Sarah Bradley.
Sea-Level Change

4,000 BC

Legend
Metres above or below mean sea level
-4.501 - -50
-40 - -30
-29 - -20
-19 - -15
-14 - -10
-9 - -5
-4 - 0
1 - 5
6 - 10
11 - 15

Coordinate System: British National Grid
Projection: Transverse Mercator
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Units: Meter

Models created in collaboration with Dr Sarah Bradley.
Understanding the changing context …
Understanding seafaring
Ten canoes from Pitcairn search empty ocean north of Easter Island and one luckily finds Sala y Gomez, its tiny neighbour. The other crews attempt to return by latitude sailing and all succeed, except for one which dies at sea.
Thinking about thinking about parameters …
Understanding the texture of the sea
Texture and tides
Thinking about the seaways
In conclusion...

**Tacking**
- the process of transition itself
- our process of understanding it
In conclusion...

Tacking across the channel
(N.B. arrows go both ways)
In conclusion...

Tacking
not a switch from black to white,
need to focus on the grey
In conclusion...

**Tacking**

between dates and process
The western seaways... key to understanding the transition
Open Day
Saturday 14th July